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House set to OK AIDS funding Abortion gag rule has barred some programs overseas

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Washington -- House leaders, including Rep. Tom Lantos of San Mateo, will announce an agreement today with the White House that may end a conflict over abortion politics and authorize President Bush's \$15 billion plan to combat AIDS overseas.

The agreement will allow the money to go to international health agencies and clinics that provide family planning and abortion services in addition to AIDS-related work.

By agreeing not to invoke the so-called global gag rule, Bush pleased advocates of birth control. Anti-abortion forces with whom he is traditionally allied didn't return repeated phone calls seeking comment.

The gag rule, also known as the Mexico City policy because that is where former President Ronald Reagan announced it, bars U.S. money from groups that provide abortions or counsel women on getting the procedure. It was revoked by former President Bill Clinton but reinstated by Bush -- who now will allow the AIDS money to go forward without regard to the abortion policy.

"I'm so excited. This is a great victory for women and children around the world," said Kathy Kneer, executive director of Planned Parenthood Affiliates of California.

BILL'S FATE STILL UNCERTAIN

Some conservatives in the Republican-controlled Congress have been trying to write the gag rule into the bill that will authorize the AIDS money, and they can be expected to persist as the proposal moves through Congress. That leaves the bill's fate uncertain, even though Bush made it clear in his State of the Union address in January that the AIDS program was an important legislative priority for him.

The agreement calls for a \$15 billion, five-year program to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria in 12 African countries, Haiti and Guyana, which have been hard hit by the AIDS epidemic. The bill was negotiated with the White House by Lantos, the ranking Democrat on the House International Relations Committee, and the panel's chairman, Rep. Henry Hyde, R-Ill.

The AIDS bill had been caught in the long-standing fight over the gag rule. Last month, the White House offered what it called a compromise: Organizations that perform abortions could get the AIDS money, but had to keep their programs strictly separate and account for all the money.

However, AIDS advocates said such bookkeeping rules would be impractical in Third World countries and would discriminate against pregnant women with AIDS. These groups

and their legislative allies continued to pressure the White House, trying to separate the issues of AIDS and abortion.

LANTOS PREDICTS VICTORY

"On a bipartisan basis, we'll be able to push this through the committee," Lantos said, predicting that he and Hyde will have the majority to turn back a challenge from anti-abortion members.

"In negotiating this with the White House, I felt it was extremely important not to become bogged down in gag rule politics. . . . So far, I've been successful in getting that rational position to prevail," Lantos said.

While the accord with the White House lacks a written promise not to extend the gag rule to AIDS services providers, one Capitol Hill source said, "We're getting fairly strong signals from the White House that this will be the policy."

It was on that basis that Hyde and Lantos, joined by co-sponsors who include Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Oakland, and abortion opponent Rep. Dave Weldon, R- Fla., agreed to introduce the bill today. A Senate version is expected to be introduced later this week.

The White House has made it clear that Bush views AIDS as a health care issue and doesn't want his plan to be mired in domestic abortion politics.

"The administration is pleased that Congress is working to move forward on this important initiative by crafting legislation," said White House spokesman Ken Lisaius. He wouldn't comment directly on the gag rule issue.

STRESSING PREVENTION

The AIDS program will stress preventing the disease, borrowing programs like the successful one in Uganda that highlights abstinence, condom use and fidelity to partners. It also will make anti-AIDS drugs more available to those who are infected.

Another issue that could surface as the legislation works its way through Congress is which agency will control the money. The negotiated bill designates an HIV-AIDS response coordinator to oversee the program. But some AIDS advocates say the programs should be administered directly by such groups as the Agency for International Development because of their experience in foreign aid programs.

The Global AIDS Fund, a 2-year-old group established by the United Nations, would get \$1 billion in the first year, but then may get less money if the United States finds it isn't spending the money efficiently.

The bill calls for spending \$3 billion a year over five years, even though Bush initially wanted to spend only \$2 billion in the first year, then ramp up the program.

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